

Chris Christie's post Hurricane Sandy transformation from bully to bipartisan hero has all but guaranteed a landslide reelection and a potential 2016 presidential run.

As voters head to the polls in today's gubernatorial election in New Jersey, the current Governor, Republican Chris Christie, holds a near 30-point lead over his Democratic rival, State Senator Barbara Buono. [Ashley Koning](#) and [David Redlawsk](#) look at how his reaction to 2012's Hurricane Sandy has enabled Christie to stage a dramatic comeback after a first term mainly fraught with polarization and growing public disenchantment. They write that Christie's leadership in a time of crisis, as well as his much greater campaign support, have all but assured that he will retain the Governorship, and may even pave the way for a presidential bid in 2016.



From the moment he took office as governor in January 2010, [Chris Christie](#) instantly became a "larger-than-life" figure in both New Jersey and national politics. Christie [unseated Democratic Governor Jon Corzine](#) in the midst of the worst economic recession in 80 years, with rising unemployment and spiking home foreclosures. Christie's victory, built upon claims of fiscal conservatism and his reputation as a no-nonsense U.S. Attorney for the district of New Jersey, was the first significant win for the Republican Party after the 2008 presidential election. It was especially noteworthy since Christie's win occurred in such a solidly left-leaning state.



Within months of his inauguration, Christie was already polarizing New Jersey. For some, he became a governor they loved; for others, a governor they loved to hate. His battles with the [teacher's union](#) and [state workers](#) sparked outrage and opposition from Democrats in his first two years. His significant [budget cuts to education](#), quest for rigorous [tenure reform](#), and push for [charter schools](#) earned him status as enemy number one of New Jersey's most powerful union, the [New Jersey Education Association](#) (NJEA). Christie's condemnation of unions in general and his war against pensions and benefits made national news.

Despite these high profile fights, Christie managed to become the GOP's poster boy for a new kind of moderate Republican. For the most part, he focused his first term not on the usual conservative Republican social issues of abortion and same-sex marriage, but rather on balancing state budgets and cutting taxes in a time of state and national economic crisis. When Christie managed to forge alliances with the leadership of the Democrat-controlled legislature, the result was a bi-partisan victory for Christie, enabling him to [cut state worker pension and health benefits](#) and push through [teacher evaluation reforms](#).



Governor of New Jersey Chris Christie Credit: New Jersey National Guard (Creative Commons BY SA)

These accomplishments garnered him Republican praise across the country and made him key to the party's

fundraising, campaign efforts, and future.

When he did tackle social issues, Christie acted swiftly; doing what he thought was necessary and providing reasons for his actions beyond the typical partisan rhetoric. When he made deep [funding cuts to Planned Parenthood](#), he cited goals to prevent waste and high costs. And when [he vetoed a same-sex marriage bill in 2012](#), which had strong support from both the [legislature](#) and [New Jersey citizens](#), he did not so much focus on his own personal opposition as reason for the veto but rather the need for the [people to directly decide on the matter through a vote](#). But Christie also knows when he has lost – though this is rare – as seen in his [reluctant acceptance](#) of a [state judge's ruling](#) making same-sex marriage legal in New Jersey, which he initially appealed but then dropped after the [state Supreme Court said it did not foresee Christie's side winning the case](#).

The intense admiration or distaste shown for Christie during much of his first term mirrored the intensity of his governing style. Epitomizing the tough-guy “Jersey” stereotype seen in movies and TV shows, Christie governed with a no-nonsense style of alarming bluntness and unrestrained verbal aggression. His brash frankness was a quality that fellow Republicans generally applauded and that Democrats condemned. On multiple occasions throughout his first term, Christie publicly called individuals who dared to challenge him “[jerks](#),” “[idiots](#),” “[partisan hacks](#),” and “[numbnuts](#)”, wanting reporters to “[take a bat](#)” to one state senator and labeling the chief budget officer for the state Office of Legislative Services “[Dr. Kevorkian of the numbers](#).” And Christie’s sharp tongue has not just been reserved for government officials: [reporters](#), the cast of “[Jersey Shore](#),” and [average citizens](#) have all faced the governor’s wrath.

It was not all that surprising, then, that by the summer of 2012, New Jerseyans began to grow a bit tired of their hotheaded and confrontational governor. [Citizens saw little progress on the economic comeback](#) he promised, [his gay marriage veto](#) and [stances on education](#) made him unpopular with many, and his publicised temper flares – including a [heated exchange with a citizen on the boardwalk that summer](#) – made him more a Mafioso-like bully than an executive leader.

From inauguration to September 2012, Christie’s favorable numbers hovered around the 50-percent mark, but citizens [increasingly saw their leader as stubborn, arrogant, and self-centered](#), making them feel angrier and more worried about him as time went on. Rampant speculation over a [2012 presidential bid for Christie](#) – followed by [running mate rumors](#) – moreover placed him front and center on the GOP’s national stage during a presidential election year, leaving many New Jerseyans yearning for new state leadership as their current governor’s attention seemed preoccupied with bigger and “better” things. Christie’s general situation was best described by a [September 2012 Rutgers-Eagleton Poll](#) that showed 47 percent of New Jersey voters anticipated preferring someone else in the 2013 election, while only 44 percent thought the governor deserved a second term as Figure 1, below, illustrates.

Figure 1 – Do you think Governor Christie deserves to be re-elected to another term, or is it time for someone new?

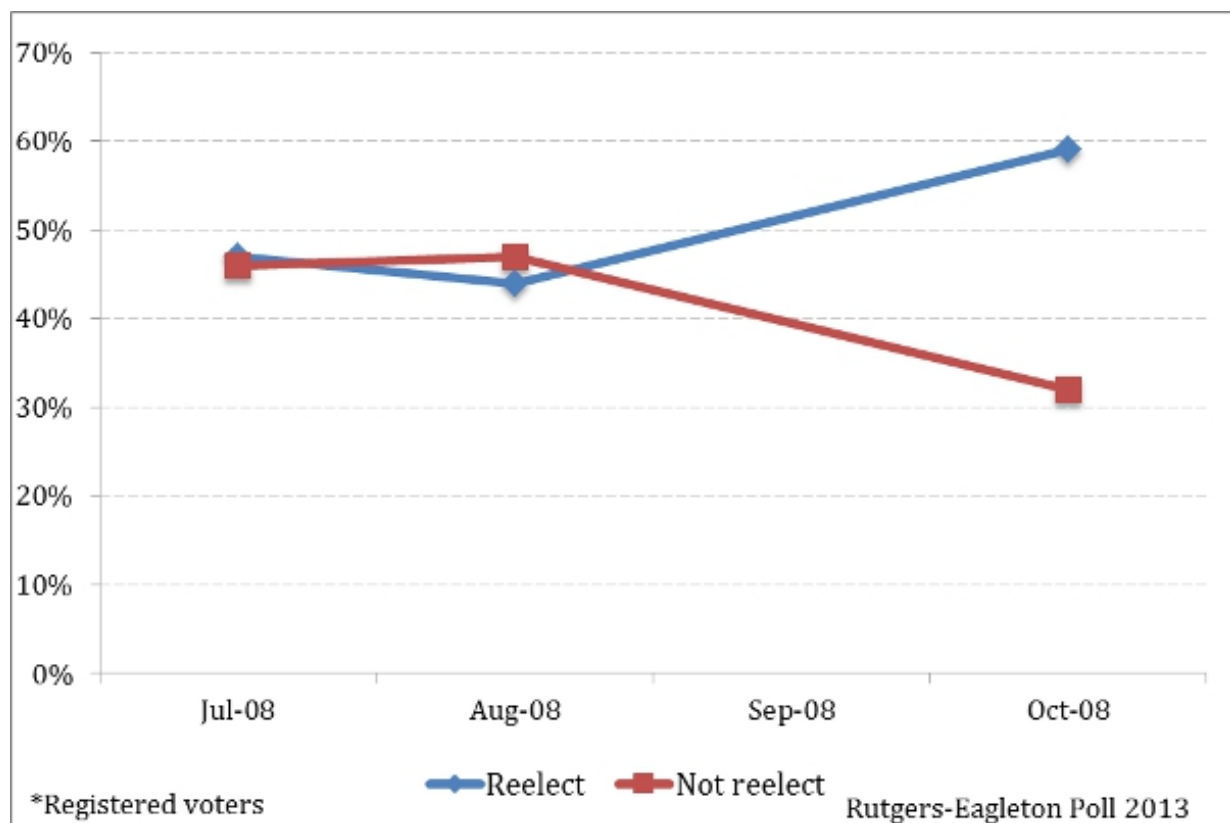
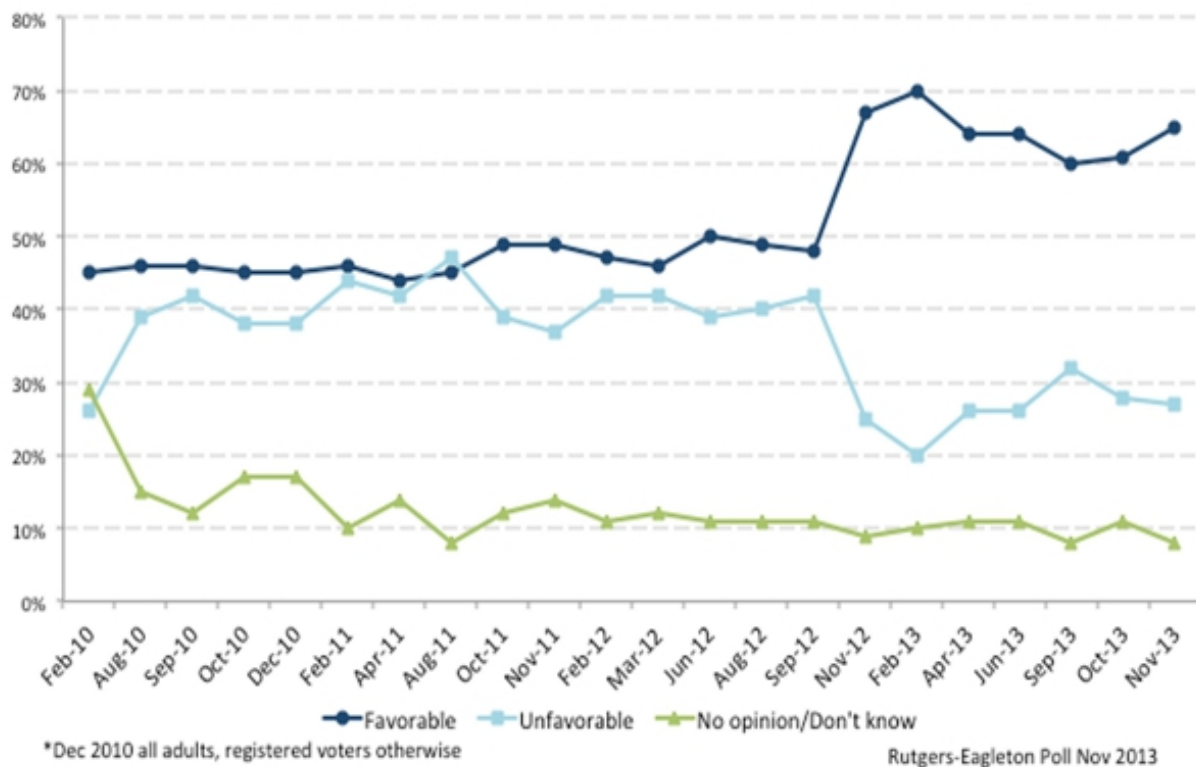


Figure Credit: [Caitlin Sullivan](#).

But [Hurricane Sandy](#) massively changed both the physical and political landscape of New Jersey. As Sandy wreaked havoc a year ago, destroying shore communities and causing huge damage even inland, Christie morphed into the epitome of a fearless leader in a time of crisis; his competence and command was perhaps best exemplified by his [embrace](#) of the “hated” (by many in his own party) President Obama as they both visited devastated shore areas. In appearing to set aside politics, Christie’s image among many New Jerseyans quickly went from bully to [beacon of bipartisanship](#). Christie – and his [now-famous blue fleece](#) jacket he wore throughout the storm and its aftermath – earned acclaim from both sides of the aisle, making him an even bigger household name than ever before. In a complete reversal of New Jerseyans’ previously growing skepticism toward the governor, Christie’s handling of the storm made him the [pride of the state](#). In the year that has followed, his ratings (shown in Figure 2, below) have ridden a prolonged “[Sandy](#)” effect that has both sustained his overall support and made a second term for him seem all but inevitable.

Figure 2 – Favorability ratings for Governor Chris Christie, February 2010 – November 2013



Note: Results of question: “Is your general impression of Governor Chris Christie favorable, or unfavorable?” Figure Credit: [Caitlin Sullivan](#).

Christie’s almost-certain victory on Election Day also comes about because of the enormous disparities between Christie and his Democratic opponent, state Sen. Barbara Buono. [Buono announced her candidacy](#) right after Sandy hit, but most assumed other, higher profile, Democrats – such as [now-U.S. Senator Cory Booker](#) – would be interested. But Sandy not only wiped out beaches and houses; it also cleared the Democratic field. Post-Sandy, no other Democrat would challenge Christie, leaving Buono as the [lone contender](#). But Buono has been no match for the governor – whether in personality, popularity, support, or finances – making little ground over the course of the campaign within her party base or with New Jersey as a whole, as Figure 3’s polling figures show.

Figure 3 – Median smoothed polling for New Jersey Gubernatorial Race – October 2012- November 2013

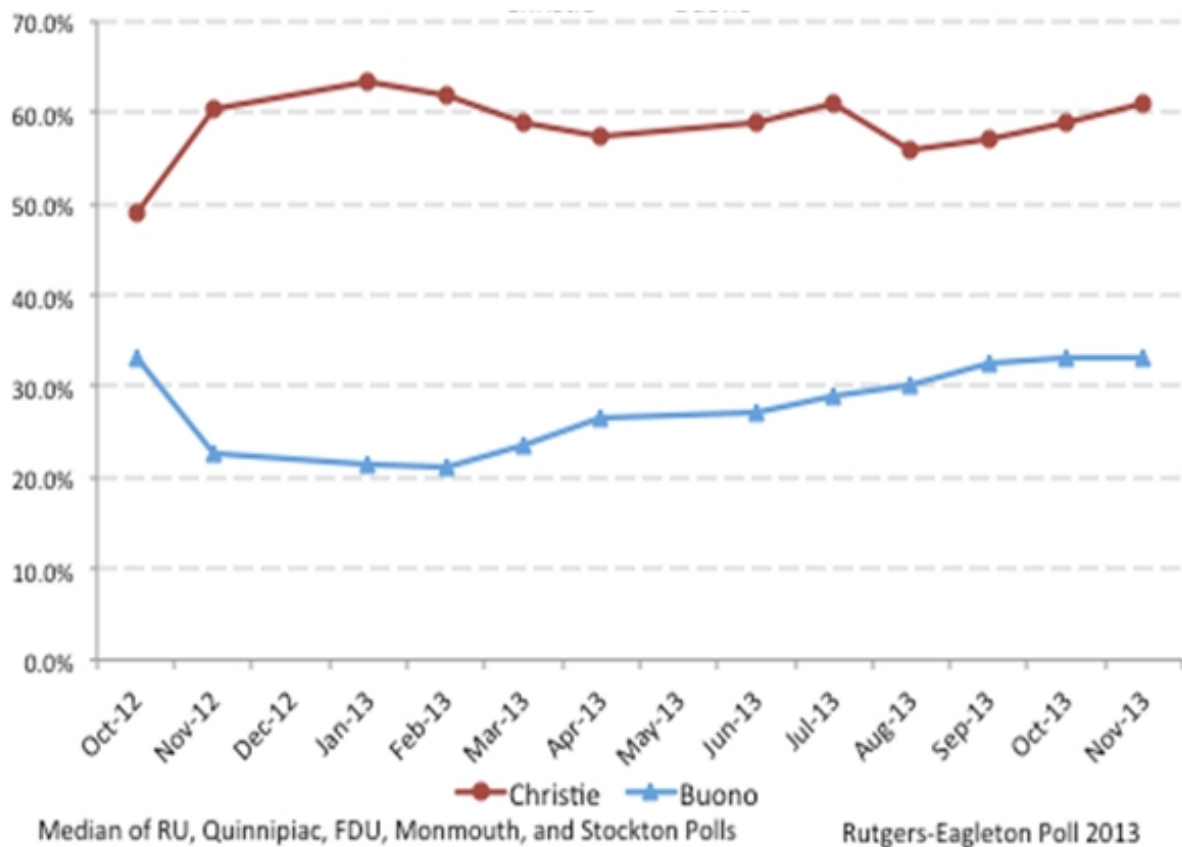
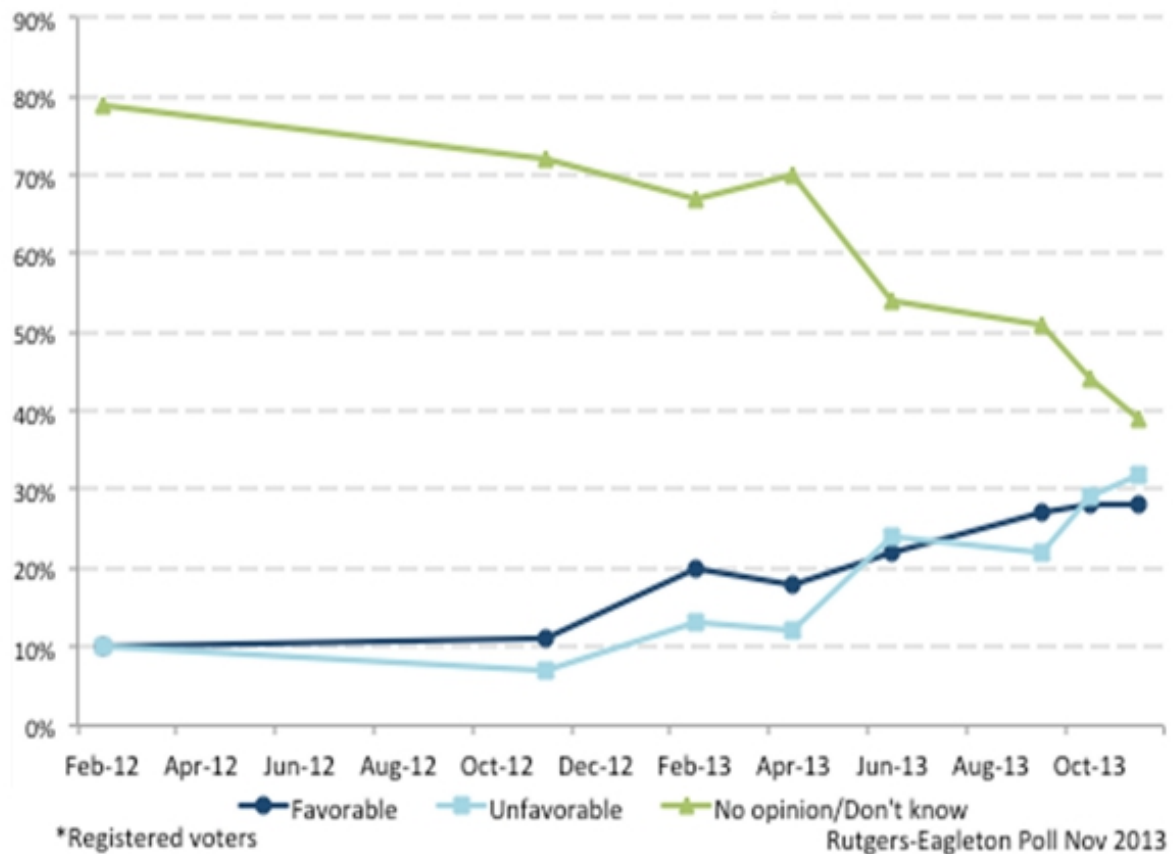


Figure Credit: [Caitlin Sullivan](#).

Buono started with a severe [lack of name recognition](#). Even as we reach the end of the campaign, well over a third of voters have [no impression or opinion of her](#), as Figure 4 shows. Among those who do, more are unfavorable than favorable, probably because what they know about her mostly comes from an onslaught of attack ads the Christie campaign has unleashed. Her favorability rating is not even half that of Christie's, and despite [voters' disapproval of Christie on a variety of top issues](#) like the economy, jobs, and taxes, they overwhelmingly [see Christie as more in line with New Jersey's views](#) and [more equipped to handle these areas](#) than Buono.

Figure 4 – Favorability ratings for State Senator Barbara Buono, February 2012 – November 2013



Note: Results of question: “Is your general impression of State Senator Barbara Buono favorable, or unfavorable?”. Figure Credit: [Caitlin Sullivan](#).

Buono’s campaign woes also stem from [her struggle to gain support within her own party leadership](#). About 60 [Democratic elected local officials](#), along with some traditionally Democratic trade unions, have publicly backed Christie. This is reflected among voters: large numbers of Democrats say they plan to vote for the Republican governor, who has touted his “bipartisan” support. Voters who identify as independents – the always-coveted middle in any election – are unwaveringly in Christie’s corner, as are virtually all Republicans. And those voting for Buono are not even all that enthusiastic about her, with most saying their [vote is not mainly in support of the Democrat](#) but rather in opposition to Christie.

Buono’s finances fare no better: she has had barely \$3 million to spend even with New Jersey’s generous matching funds, which provide candidates with public campaign money. That sum is paltry compared to the over \$13 million Christie has collected, which has financed [his sixteen television commercials to Buono’s two](#) – not to mention Christie’s multiple other modes of campaigning.

From early on, the question for Election Day has less been *if* Christie will win than it has been about how large a victory to expect. Buono’s choice for a running mate in little known union leader [Milly Silva](#) provided no boost, and the two gubernatorial debates – while giving Buono a chance to go toe-to-toe with the governor – appear to have had little real impact. And Christie himself has not taken his reelection campaign lightly. Unlike [Booker’s much criticized and lackluster efforts](#) during his winning special U.S. Senate race in mid-October, Christie has not taken his popularity for granted, rigorously campaigning across the state and making himself the face of post-Sandy progress.

While Buono has put forth plausible challenges to Christie on education, the economy, same-sex marriage, and Sandy recovery, her points have fallen on deaf ears and her criticisms have not stuck to a governor who makes the “Teflon” president Ronald Reagan look sticky. The post-Sandy “rally ‘round the governor” effect for Christie has been unprecedented: [his favorability and job approval remain at or near all time highs](#) one year after the Superstorm, and a large majority of voters view him as a [smart and strong leader and say he makes them proud](#).

Most critically, [approval of the governor's Sandy recovery efforts](#) continues to be high and widespread with virtually no one expressing disapproval. His shoot-from-the-hip straight talk once loathed and criticized by many as unprofessional and unpolished has become one of his most admired traits, continually cited by supporters for [why they like](#) and [why they will be voting for the governor to have a second term](#).

While Christie may not be winning over the minds of New Jersey voters on a number of key issues, he has instead captured many hearts, standing as a symbol of leadership, resilience, and hope. Sandy was physically devastating to the state but has proven to be the [perfect political storm](#), acting as the driving force for Christie's elevated status from divisive politician to icon of bipartisanship and moderation. Adding in Christie's natural talent as a politician, the governor has taken the past year to transform himself from a Jersey stereotype and [late night talk show punch line](#) to a new kind of formidable political figure ready for the national stage. In the words of Christie's favorite musician, [Bruce Springsteen](#), Christie is perhaps ultimately "[born to run](#)" for higher office; and if so, in the words of another Jersey music legend, [Jon Bon Jovi](#), the governor's reelection means that Christie is only "[half way there](#)" – to the White House, that is.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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